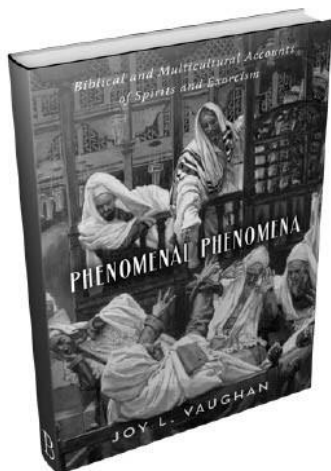


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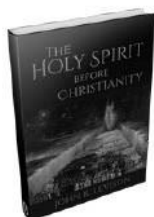
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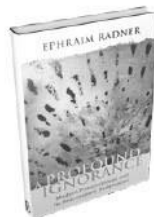
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REVIEWS

Towards A Pentecostal Theology of Praxis: A Case Study. By John Mark Robeck. Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, 2021. 174 pp.

John Mark Robeck is an Assistant Professor of Theology, Ethics, and Culture at Vanguard University. He is an ordained minister with the Assemblies of God with teaching and pastoral experience spanning North and Central America. Robeck's experience grants him unique insight as he draws from liberation theology to make the case for a Pentecostal theology of social praxis. Robeck presents an argument in four parts, looking first at the conversations of liberation theology on Pentecostalism and Pentecostalism on liberation. Chapters two through four present a case study of liberative Pentecostal praxis in El Salvador.

Chapter one is Robeck's literature review, and it is a comprehensive one at that. The chapter opens with comments about the father of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez, on liberation as the actualization of theology in historical context through human action (17), moving quickly to Evangelical and Pentecostal theologians' reflections on liberation's primacy of praxis (19). Here, Robeck draws from sources ranging from Karl Marx to Manuel J. Gaxiola (20). Robeck traces responses of both liberation and Pentecostal streams to each other, noting that through their commentary of the other, each is seeking differentiation from the other (5). However, Robeck argues for the congruence of these two seemingly disparate streams "beyond the basic Pentecostal Theology of Social Concern. . . . Pentecostals have begun to acknowledge the influence of structures in the perpetuation of poverty in Latin American, and as such, have begun to address the political realm" (7).

Chapter two sets the stage for the case study, beginning with the historical context of El Salvador. Interestingly, from socio-political history, Robeck then moves to micro-histories of individual early missionaries (66). By Robeck's admission, this section may read like simply a list of missionary endeavors. However, Robeck argues that the people who comprise this list laid the groundwork for Pentecostalism in El Salvador. Without these, "any potential development of a Pentecostal praxis in the region would be impossible" (66). Robeck credits Salvadoran Pentecostalism's current autonomy and grass-roots nature to the methodology of early missionaries (70).

Chapter three moves forward one hundred years to look at three Salvadoran Pentecostal churches. This chapter shares the personal testimonies of the three Pentecostal pastors, each of whom is a full member of the community in which they pastor. There is a pivot in each story where the crises of poverty and oppression

experienced by the pastors acted as a linchpin for congregational social engagement, including, at times, collaborating with the government and NGOs. The crises experienced by the pastors include gang violence (100), chronic illness and disability (102, 104), and the deaths and imprisonment of children (109). In each case, the specific suffering of the pastor drew them deeper into a relationship with God and into a commitment to serving the community through meeting the practical needs of the poor. Emphasizing that these three congregations are themselves poor, Robeck contends that the incorporation of praxis allows experience and community relationships to “speak into [the congregation’s] understanding of God” (116) and let this understanding of God inform their actions.

Chapter four ties the experiential narratives shared in the previous chapter into liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo’s hermeneutical circle (121). Robeck then builds on Segundo’s proposition by examining the communication of theology of praxis in the selected churches using lenses of Cheryl Bridges Johns’ homiletical paradigm (124) and Douglas Petersen’s appropriation of Segundo for Pentecostalism (144).

Robeck defines praxis as “a dialectic of concrete reality and theological reflection” (151). In deftly weaving together scholarly conversation on liberation theology and Pentecostal proclamation and theology of social concern with on-the-ground case studies rich in historical context and present-day narrative, Robeck offers one example of such dialectic through this book. The focus on three churches within El Salvador provides a valuable case study. However, further research on how a Pentecostal theology of praxis may be evidenced in other locales would be instructive. Further, while the literature review is impressive in the depths, one wonders if broadening the review to include either the Catholic Social Doctrine or the concept of Integral Mission as declared by the 1974 Lausanne Congress would have added to the richness of the book or simply muddied the issue of a distinctively Pentecostal theology of social engagement.

This book provides excellent fodder for conversations that may otherwise be trapped in binary oppositions. By looking at how specific impoverished Pentecostal communities engage in liberative action (or praxis) articulated in Pentecostal terms, Robeck challenges the reader to go beyond the oft-quoted line, “Liberation chose the poor and the poor chose Pentecostalism.” This book is academic yet approachable for the interested reader. This reviewer recommends this book for advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and those curious about either liberation theology or Pentecostal social engagement.

Rebekah Bled (rbled@oru.edu) is the Administrative Assistant for the Center of Spirit-empowered Research and a PhD student in Contextual Theology at Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA.